

# Journal of Education for Sustainable Development

<http://jsd.sagepub.com/>

---

## **An Ethical Framework for a Sustainable World**

Kartikeya V. Sarabhai

*Journal of Education for Sustainable Development* 2010 4: 155

DOI: 10.1177/097340821000400201

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://jsd.sagepub.com/content/4/2/155.citation>

---

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:

Centre For Environment Education

**Additional services and information for *Journal of Education for Sustainable Development* can be found at:**

**Email Alerts:** <http://jsd.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://jsd.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Sep 14, 2010

[What is This?](#)

## An Ethical Framework for a Sustainable World

The 35th General Conference of UNESCO, which met just before the Copenhagen climate change meeting in November 2009, adopted a resolution that called on the Director General to submit a report on the ‘desirability of preparing a draft declaration of ethical principles in relation to climate change...’

A few months earlier, the World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology (COMEST) had submitted a background report to UNESCO on the ‘Ethical Implications of Global Climate Change’.<sup>1</sup> Its first conclusion was that ‘global climate change itself—not simply its possible impacts—constitutes an ethical challenge’, and second that ‘there is no simple basis for an ethical response to the challenges of global climate change’.<sup>2</sup> The report went on to stress that ‘ethics is...not something added on top of other issues related to climate change, but rather a constitutive part of all of the reasonably justifiable responses to the challenges of climate change. Therefore, it can be stated unequivocally that climate change cannot be dealt with adequately and properly if the ethical dimensions...are not highlighted, well understood, and taken into account in decisions about responses’. The report ended by saying that ethics needs to be ‘a core and necessary element of any debate about climate change and its challenges’.<sup>3</sup>

Climate change, biodiversity, the elimination of poverty—for each of these global sustainable development challenges we need an ethical perspective based on wide understanding and basic agreement on key principles to guide our policies and approaches to dealing with them. We need something, for example, like the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a significant articulation of world-accepted basic values. The two major conventions stemming from the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, represented international consensus on certain key ethical values, but each dealt with ethical principles in the context of specific challenges and issues.

At the Earth Summit, many felt a need for a statement that would deal with the ethics of sustainability as a whole. The response was The Earth Charter Initiative, which set out to ‘promote the transition to sustainable ways of living and a global

society founded on a shared ethical framework that includes respect and care for the community of life, ecological integrity, universal human rights, respect for diversity, economic justice, democracy, and a culture of peace'.<sup>4</sup> The Charter was developed through a five-year, international, widely consultative drafting process that started in 1995. The first draft was issued in 1997 and was discussed at various meetings over the next few years. Finally, on 29 June 2000, the Earth Charter Commission formally launched the Earth Charter at the Peace Palace in The Hague.

The preamble to the Charter starts with, 'We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise. To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny. We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace. Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations'.<sup>5</sup>

It goes on to stress that 'we urgently need a shared vision of basic values to provide an ethical foundation for the emerging world community. Therefore, together in hope we affirm the following interdependent principles for a sustainable way of life as a common standard by which the conduct of all individuals, organizations, businesses, governments, and transnational institutions is to be guided and assessed'.<sup>6</sup>

UNESCO, during its 32nd General Conference in October 2003, adopted a resolution recognizing the Earth Charter 'as an important ethical framework for sustainable development'. The resolution affirmed member states' intentions to 'utilize the Earth Charter as an educational instrument, particularly in the framework of the United Nations Decade for Education for Sustainable Development'.<sup>7</sup>

There is now 10 years of rich experience in using the Earth Charter for education for sustainable development. To mark the first decade of the Earth Charter, we bring you a special issue which has tried to capture this experience. We would like to particularly thank Richard Clugston, Executive Director, Earth Charter USA and Mirian Vilela, Executive Director, Earth Charter International, who solicited these articles and worked closely with the editorial team in putting this issue together.

Kartikeya V. Sarabhai

Editor-in-Chief, Journal of Education for Sustainable Development

## Notes

1 UNESCO Executive Board, 182 EX/INF.16, Paris, 2 September 2009.

2 Ibid. p. 21.

3 Ibid. p. 24.

4 Earth Charter Mission Statement. Available at [www.earthcharterinaction.org](http://www.earthcharterinaction.org).

5 Earth Charter, Preamble. Available at [www.earthcharterinaction.org](http://www.earthcharterinaction.org), See also p. 317 of this issue.

6 Ibid. p. 318.

7 [http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=24221&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=24221&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html).